Lea Novi

From social engaged photography
to decolonizing photography: a report on my practice

**Table of contents**

Introduction

1. Socially engaged photography: my practice
Introduction
Defining  Photography
Power structures of image production
Reflection on my own photography practice
Project: People of trust (2015)
Project: Help in the refugee situation (2015)

2. Social engaged photography: other methodologies
A range of projects and approaches
Socially engaged portraiture
Eva Sajovic: 'Elephant&Castle'
Eva Sajovic's socially engaged approach to portraiture
The way of producing images
Power structures
The presentation

3. A journey to Suriname in the Netherlands:
the project that was not implemented
My proposed project
Background of the Project
Approaches to the Project
Considering potential viewers

Conclusion

# Introduction

For some time now I have been working with the concept of socially engaged photography. Before I was familiar with this specific concept, I was already thinking and working partly in this direction. My question to myself at that time was: How can I develop projects that on the one hand represent themselves aesthetically and on the other hand bring value to the people with whom I work on certain topics, like a non-hierarchical collaboration?

During Lumix Festival 2020, I listened to an online talk about digital storytelling by Fred Ritchin. Fred Ritchin is dean of the School at the International Center of Photography. In it, Ritchin looked at the medium of photography, how it has changed and evolved in recent years, and especially what changes and opportunities have come about as a result of the Internet. He looked at both the positive and negative aspects.

I felt connected to the statements and opinions he expressed about photography. Ritchin used the term „socially engaged photographer", which particularly resonated with me. This lecture triggered me to look further and more intensively into the subject of „socially engaged photography".

This research brought back my underlying motivation, of why I started taking photographs in the first place. Photography started making more sense to me again because this socially engaged method enabled me to work with people respectfully and according to my ethical values.

I strongly believe that photography can create awareness and educate about certain issues. By sharing photographic stories, people can reflect on their own perceptions. „Photographs cannot create a moral position, but they can strengthen a moral position-and help build a position in the making" (Sontag, 2001, p. 17).

The thesis shows the development of my practice that I have been looking at over the last few months. Originally, I had planned to do a report on my project, but I decided against it, given the results of my research. I report on this research and the abandoned project and what I have learned from it.

Chapter 1 includes an account in which I question and present my photographic practice, which I did over the last years in the context of socially engaged photographic practices. I will focus on two projects, a portrait work of my friends and a collaboration with refugee minors.

Chapter 2 will focus more broadly on socially engaged photography in the practices of some established photographers, compare their projects, thus showing differences in practice. I analyse one project in detail, to explore the question, of how the photographer used this approach to photograph people she did not know before.

Chapter 3 will present a project about the dish roti in the Netherlands, which I tried to implement according to socially engaged practice. In this chapter, I will explain why this project required a different approach. Finally, I arrive at the concept of decolonised photography practice.

I conclude my report by summarising what I have found through my research. Furthermore, I describe potential ways to plan projects in the future in terms of the danger of not replicating the violence of the camera in projects.

# 1. Socially engaged photography: my practice

## Introduction

*Why do I want to take pictures? For what purpose do I want to take pictures? Where do I want my pictures to be shown? For whom do I make my projects? What method do I want to use to produce my work? What is the core content of my work?*

These questions are part of my exploration that I have with my work and the medium of photography. At the same time, I have reflected on the photography experiences I have had so far and on the projects I have already completed. Some examples, in which I have critically dealt with these questions, I will highlight in this chapter.

## Defining Photography

For me, photography is a medium to better understand the world I live in. My references in photography are artists who manage, with the help of their photographs, to open or motivate a new discourse, to focus or narrow in on a certain aspect or even change the viewer's position and understanding.

To explain what a photograph is quite complex because today is much more than only a technical process. Ariella Azoulay is an author, art curator, filmmaker, and theorist of photography. She however attempts to present a definition of a photograph in her article called *What is a photograph? What is photography?*. "A photograph is the product of an encounter of several protagonists, mainly photographer and photographed, camera and spectator" (2008, p.11). Her describing what a photograph is going indeed deeper, by telling how a photograph comes about in the first place. I understand this to mean that a photograph is the outcome of an encounter that can also facilitate exchange. If you view a photograph in this way, the situation in which the photo has been created will be the focus and this, in my opinion, is exactly the important part.

To see the exchange, through which you can get different perceptions, as the actual goal, learn about different meanings and cultures makes much more sense to me in my work. It is this idea of the encounter and exchange which I want to prioritise in my work.

## Power structures of image production

Azoulay's and Ritchin's thinking influenced me as I started to think and to reflect on the way of my thinking about photography. Traditionally, photoshoots are highly hierarchical. It is often the case that before and during photo shoots with other people, the photographer alone makes decisions and thus determines how the photo looks in the end. Of course, I distinguish between commercial and artistic work. In commercial work, it is often the photographer's style that is picked in order to best advertise and sell the product. The photographer acts according to the specifications of his or her employer. The situation is different for artistic projects, where the photographer can make all decisions because they are not employed. Instead, the photographer wants to find out, understand or experience something and tries to communicate this to the audience through their photographs. Nevertheless, similar in both practices is, in the case of photographing people, the photographer is always behind the camera and the portrayed person is in front of the camera. So, the question is how can you make sure that this act will be democratic? And why do I want to work in a democratic way?

**Reflection on my own photography practice**

When I started studying photography in 2014 I noticed an imbalance of power between the person who is taking a photograph and the person who is being photographed, all throughout the photography process, which I didn't like at that time, though I couldn't reflect on it either.

Project: People of trust (2015)

This was a project about my close friends. I was wondering if there is a difference between photographing friends and strangers, and if this inequality between the person who is taking the photo and the person in the photo would be less present in a project like this because you are already familiar with each other and can communicate more easily. Therefore, other questions developed: Do you first need to build trust in order to photograph people in a respectful and genuine way? Can a viewer see this difference in the trust of the people in the photos? My ideas were confirmed in this project. Working with people I already knew was easier and more pleasant for me and the person portrayed because we already trusted each other.

Of course, that doesn't mean I can't work with people I don't know. It's about how you want to work with people and what it takes to build trust or a relationship. It always depends on what reason are you making the photos. In an online talk with the photographer Bieke Deeporter, her response when asked how she managed to become so intimate with these people, was that she doesn't have a trick, but it is very important that people see her as a person and not as a photographer. She wants them to know that she does not see them as objects. I agree. For me, it is also important that I see the people I work with as people, not subjects and that they see me as a person and not just a photographer. Such a relationship is created through an honest and familiar form of interaction that develops over time.

Images of the Project: People of trust
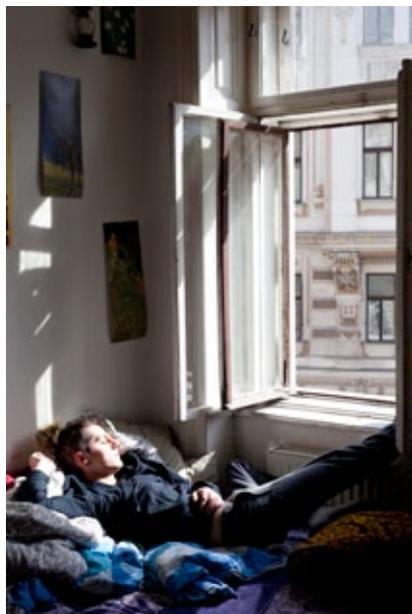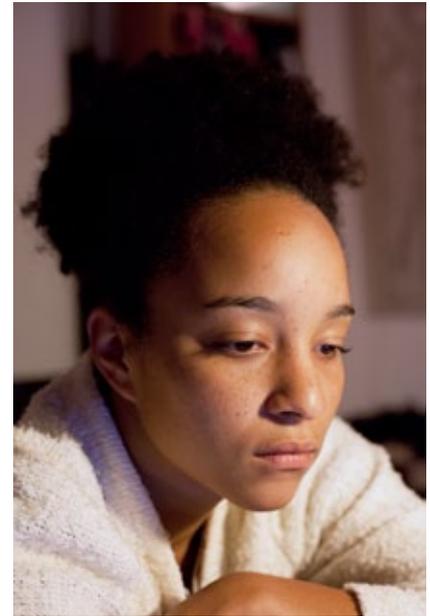
Project: Help in the refugee situation (2015)

My next project was a collaboration with two fellow students initiated due to the migration move-ments to Germany. This project was part of a course at our university called „Help in the refugee situation“. We developed a concept in which we offered workshops in an asylum center for unac-companied refugee children aged 8 to 13 years who came from Syria and Afghanistan. We provi-ded the children with both digital and analog cameras. Moreover, we not only gave photography workshops but also printing and bookbinding workshops. In this project, I didn‘t feel like a photo-grapher because I didn‘t take any photos. I focused on preparing the workshops and the colla-boration during the workshops. In Chris Becher and Mad Holm's text *Imagining Otherwise: The impact of aesthetics in an ethical framework*, they describe a similar project in which they helped refugees to film „their precarious situation and make a short video to spread through the wider support network " (2019, p.23). The two initiators did not consider the project's results as their own art. They were trying to find ways of working in a way that each participant, including the project organisers, gives and receives something in return. They were looking for „a way to establish a non-hierarchical collaboration that doesn´t sacrifice the aesthetic but rather subsumes both it and the political within an ethical framework.“ (2019, p. 26) This is exactly the question that I have tried to find answers to during my research into social engaged photography which I will present in the next chapter.

Painted fabric bags made by participants of the worksop

Documentation of the different workshops

## 2. Socially engaged photography: other methodologies

Before I present some examples of projects by other photographers with socially engaged practices I would like to give some more general context about this methodology. The article, *Defining Socially Engaged Photography and Its Ability to Impact a Social Change: A Case Study on As and When by Gary Bratchford and Robert Parkinson* opens with a very nice and informative way to give a glimpse of when people started to work in an engaging way.

*In the 20th century, there has been a shift in approaching the photographic practice from it being a sole provider of information or for merely visual aesthetic consumption, to one that has the ability to emancipate a change in a social or political context. This is due to a heightened discourse on the functions of art and its instrumentalisation as a tool to impact change, where art takes a „social turn ". (Bisop, Artforum 178) Notably, there have been a variety of photography works with an agenda to effect change* (Bratchford and Parkinson, 2019, p.1)*.*

During my research for social engaged projects, I discovered the website http://www.asocialpractice.com which serves as a platform where you can find research and projects on socially engaged photography. Each artist uses his or her own strategy to work in a socially engaged way. On the one hand, this is due to the selected topics with which the artists deal, which entail different preconditions. On the other hand, it is also due to different methods with how artists want to work in this framework. There is no exact set of rules defining socially engaged work. I think everyone has to find out for themselves how they can work in a democratic and collaborative way. I imagine this as a constantly changing process of developing new projects from the experiences already made.

There were many approaches and many topics that can be defined as 'socially engaged', but what is common to all the projects, I found is that these projects all happened democratically, with a big investment of time on the part of photographer and collaborator and that both should be prepared to show patience, flexibility, and spontaneity.

**A range of projects and approaches**

In my research, I learnt about different ways to collaborate with others on socially engaged photographic projects.

In Ben Krewinkel's 2012 project, a book called *A Possible Life*, he documented the daily life in the Netherlands of an illegal immigrant from Niger called Gualbert (Gualbert is not his real name). Krewinkel tried out a different approach: "It seemed sensible to me to make this story´s protagonist, Gualbert, my co-author" (Krewinkel, 2013). As co-author of the book, Gualbert decided on which photo he was or was not to be seen in. That's why some photos of Gualbert are scratched. Furthermore, Ben Krewinkel and Gualbert share all revenues on this project.

Wendy Ewald's approach is different from Ben Krewinkel's. In Ewald's community projects "the participants are actively involved in the process of image-making". (Bratchford and Parkinson, 2019, p.1). On her webpage, Ewald describes her way of working, mainly with children and women, encouraging them to use cameras to look at their own lives, their families, and their communities, and to make images of their fantasies and dreams. (Ewald 2020) In her project Back Self / White Self (1994 -1997) Ewald worked together with children on a project on the issue of race. Ewald carried out the project in a school in Durham after the school systems there were reunited. Before that, public schools were segregated along city district lines. First, she asked the children

to write about themselves. Then they were asked to write another version in which they had to imagine themselves as a member of a different race. Ewald then photographed the children posing once as a „black" and once as „white". Afterwards, she gave the children the large-format negatives of themselves to write or alter with the ideas they had previously written about. (Ewald 2020). I wonder now if she would still do this project today. She is a white artist and works with children of different races on the subject of race. She also describes on her website that she has developed beforehand a concept of how she will work with the children. I think that this kind of collaboration can be deepened because working with a ready-made concept seems not very collaborative.

Social Engaged Photography doesn´t focus only on projects which a social or political issue such as race or immigration. This approach can be used on more personal or intimate projects Sabine Rovers' Cowboy Kees in 2020. It's a book that tells of a cowboy who is living in a small village in a wooden cabin in Holland. I particularly like, that in her description of the project, she writes about what she learned from the collaboration with Kees the Cowboy. "He taught me that being a cowboy is not only about wearing a cool hat and leather boots, but also about the lifestyle that it represents. Simple, pure, and back to nature." (Sabine Rovers 2021) Rovers describes herself as a social documentary photographer and wants to make work *with* the subjects, instead of *about* them.

Through this research, I realised that I wanted to focus on a project where mainly portraits were made, to analyse an approach to making socially engaged (portrait) works. I felt that exploring these methods could help me with the project I will describe in chapter 3.

**Socially engaged portraiture**

I find portraits particularly exciting and informative because you can read so much from them. I imagine that a socially engaged way of making portraits is particularly interesting. Just by the act of taking the picture, there is only one person who can press the shutter button. So, the process of portraiture may seem difficult at first, to approach democratically. Furthermore, the result of this situation is linked to the technique of photography. One person has pressed the shutter button, and in the photo, this person is not seen. What is then more in the foreground, the person who can be seen or the person who pressed the shutter release? What does the viewer think? Can a socially engaged approach to portraiture be observed in the photographs at all?

In addition, if the photographer and the participant don't know each other, I wonder what must happen before a familiar, honest, and democratic atmosphere can be created? Are there countless meetings before the photo shoot, or is it simply different from person to person? Are there any rules at all? Can there perhaps be no rules at all, because it always depends on the context, the person, and the photographer? To get answers to my questions, I was looking for a socially engaged project that I could research more closely, where mainly portraits were taken. Below, I will analyse the project of Eva Sajovic called Elephant&Castle. For my research, I personally interviewed Eva Sajovic about her project.

# Eva Sajovic: 'Elephant&Castle'

Eva Sajovic first studied law in Utrecht and then art in London, where she currently lives, and where she also did the project Elephant&Castle (2006-ongoing). She describes her practice as socially engaged and participatory. Through it, she explores "the drivers of global displacement such as regeneration, poverty, human trafficking, culture, and climate change" (Eva Sajovic 2016). She sees photography as a "tool to create platforms for individuals to represent and to speak for themselves". For Sajovic, it is a political process when the "personal perspective of the work enters the public space because it creates the possibility of art acting as a counterpoint to mainstream narratives" (Photofusion 2017).

Elephant and Castle is a traditionally working-class area in London, with a famous shopping mall at the heart of its community. Like many areas in London, this area has in recent decades experienced redevelopment. This means that rents have become more expensive and people who have lived in the area all their lives can no longer afford to live there. This is a classic case of gentrification. Focusing on the shopping mall, Sajovic wanted to make members of this community visible. Sajovic feels that the people themselves are an essential part of the shopping mall. Her motivation also stems from the fact that she feels that such neighbourhoods are often misrepresented (Sajovic, 2021, personal interview see appendix).

Sajovic's Elephant&Castle consists of different projects. In them, she worked with different artists and the people of the community. They exhibited these results in different contexts. I focused on the project called From Home To Home. In this work, Sajovic made portraits with people who use Elephant&Castle shopping mall regularly or work there. She collaborated with the writer Sarah Butler who wrote down stories of the participants. I chose to focus on the portrait work in our interview. I wanted to find out how she created honest and intimate situations together with the participants. On her website, Eva writes that she made portraits in close collaboration with the subjects, and she captured in these portraits the story that the person wanted to tell.

I find the whole project impressive. The portraits she has made touch me. They resonate with calmness and at the same time a kind of matter-of-factness that makes the portraits special for me. They make me curious to know more about the people in them. Sajovic photographed the people in different places and with different cropping. For example, figure 1 shows a blue wall in the background, and figure 2 shows the silhouette of a building. Sajovic photographed people both indoors and outdoors. Figure 4, in contrast to figure 3, shows the whole person and therefore one can see many small details of the person's surroundings. Figure 3 is a very close-up of the person, in which you can't see so much of the surroundings, but more of the person himself. One might think that the different backgrounds make the work seem restless, as the viewer is confronted with many details at once. This is not the case for me. On the contrary, the different details I can see in the photos make the work more exciting. They also provide information about the different places where people are. In this way, I think they support the project. Maybe that's why the portraits fit together very well in a magical way.

Photos from the Elephant&Castle project by Eva Sajovic
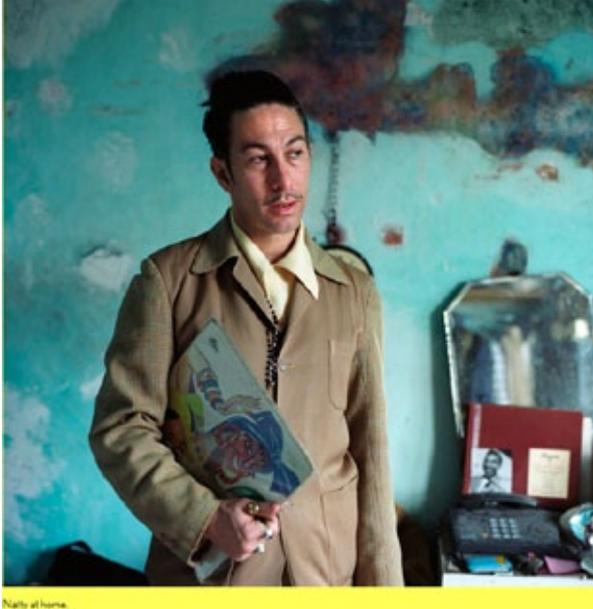


Natty at home.

Figure 1



Larry, Heygate estate in the background.

Figure 2



George in his living room, Heygate estate.

Figure 3



Claudia in her shop Nicole, E&C shopping centre.

Figure 4

**Eva Sajovic's socially engaged approach to portraiture**

This section is a summary of the interview I did with Eva Sajovic. In the appendix, you can find the full transcript interview.

Eva Sajovic does not see it as a choice to work as a socially engaged photographer. She describes that this way of working has developed naturally over time. As with previous work, she works with the subjects and their stories, always allowing the subjects to choose how and where the photograph is taken of them. Sajovic is concerned with the democratic aspect of the work itself and the question of who has a say in the decisions.

In the Elephant & Castle, where she also lives since 2002, she has recognised the same people. At one point, she started talking to some of the people. She told them about her intention to make a project about this area. This is how she first got to know each person she photographed for the project.

Eva Sajovic sees the portrait itself as an object that consists of two parts. On the one hand, it represents the story that the photo conveys, and on the other, the story of the person depicted in the photo. By this Sajovic means that for her the act of taking a photograph is an interplay between the person holding the camera and the person being photographed. So like Azoulay, Sajovic also sees the act of photographing as an encounter. However, Azoulay differentiates the concept of photography more precisely by including the imaginary viewer. I will go into this in more detail in chapter 3.

Sajovic is aware that photography is not an objective medium and that it is a subjective act. She explains this by the fact that she believes that it is not possible to show how the person sees and feels himself. But she also feels the need for the merge, between the person's story and their [Eva's] representation, to make the photo more lively.

The photos were taken in different places. Some people she has photographed at home, sometimes she meets the people several times to make the pictures because they moved the apartment. Others she has photographed directly in the shopping mall. With some people, she had a closer contact and with a few of them, she still is in contact.

In and during her photo shoots, she has not used any particular strategy that she has made up beforehand. During the photoshoots, she has reacted to each place that she has found in each case. For that, she does not use artificial light and uses the existing light of the location. She sees her photos as not staged. Sajovic describes this process as her method of photographing.

All in all, it is important for Sajovic to consider and to feel the necessity of the role that she can have and play in the process. She believes that there is always a reason why to do a project and that she is not starting a project just because she is interested in it. Thereby, she questions herself a lot on what her role as an artist is.

Finally, I asked her for whom she made the project. She listed different target groups. On the one hand, it was very important to her, that the project is for the people who can be seen in the photos. So that they can represent themselves and are happy to have something from the area of which

they themselves are part of it. She added that it can also be interesting for people who already know the area and want to know more about it. In a broader sense, the project is also for people to get a better understanding of what Elephant&Castle actually is.

**The way of producing images**

I found the interview with Eva Sajovic very interesting and especially the part where she described how she made the portraits. Her methodology is a natural interaction with the people and the environment. She didn't specify any poses or use artificial lighting. Artificial light is on the one hand also a bigger technical effort, on which you have to concentrate while working. This can be distracting when you want to fully concentrate on the person you are photographing. The lights have to be adjusted to the person, which takes time and feels artificial. The technology in the room can also change the atmosphere. People who are not used to this can feel uncomfortable much faster. On the other hand, the use of natural light is an aesthetic decision. Eva Sajoic's methodology shows how to create honest and natural situations with people by working with them and letting them participate in the decision-making process of the photo. I think you can see in the portraits that people trust Sajovic. However, I am not primarily interested in making this trust visible in the photos, but rather in how one can work together with the people and what ways there are, in socially engaged photography for this.

I also think that in this collaboration it depends on the character of the photographer. In what tone does she address the people? How exactly does she deal with people apart from how she does the portrait with them? I can't say that because you would have to be there as a witness or be involved in the project. But I think she has a very open, respectful and friendly way, at least that's how I experienced her approach during my interview.

**Power structures**

Sajovic sees her approach as democratic, in that she gives the subjects a lot of decision-making rights in the photos. Nevertheless, it is the case that she makes the photos of other persons, and she is not seen in the photos.

This democratic process with which Sajovic works does not solve the hierarchy that arises during photo shootings. The hierarchy during photo shoots can therefore only be completely eliminated if the people who are involved photograph each other or take photos together and no person is portrayed by the other. However, this approach does not make sense in every project.

In the case of From Home To Home, it would drastically change the concept. It is an agreement and also a choice to work in this way. Sajovic made this project because she thinks that the area is underrepresented, and she knew that this area will soon change fundamentally because it will be renovated. To make this project, she wanted to work with the people who see this area as their home, because for her it was clear that the people who use the area are also the ones who make the area what it is. Sajovic asked the people she photographed, talked to them, and told them about her project. They agreed and wanted to participate. She worked with them by giving them as much freedom as possible to make their own decisions. This can be seen as one goal of social engaged photography. Sabine Rovers points out that the unequal power relations in photography are not completely solved if the subject has a voice. This would only solve the difficulty in the

relationship between photographer and subject. Another difficulty is the way the work is viewed by the audience. (2019, p.22) Sajovic exhibited the project in the area where she took the photos because she also made it primarily for the people who are part of the Elephant and Castle.

**The presentation**

What I find special about Sajovic's project is the way she presented it. There were different presentations for it. She made a book with the images and texts. Sajovic said that this book was first of all for the people who are depicted in the photos. In addition, she said that it makes people happy that they can hold something in their hands and realize with it, that they are part of the area and thus significantly influence this area.

Another form of presentation is the Project Elephant Trail in 2011. The photos were printed as postcards and posters. This installation was placed around the Elephant and Castle. The type of installation served as a guide for visitors to the arena to explore it in more detail. The event was accompanied by music and international food prepared locally. According to Sajovic, the shopping mall and the people who use and operate it are underrepresented in the public perception. I believe that the exhibition „Elephant Trail" tries to draw attention to these groups of people. Through the offer to the visitors, they were invited to deal directly with the photos and at the same time with the environment.

Subsequent Eva Sajovic and artist Rebecca Davies have set up 2011, a studio in the Elephant & Castle Shopping Center. It served different people, such as artists, practitioners, and residents to bring them together through workshops and events. Furthermore, the space was also a kind of platform for people to express their opinions creatively there.

However, when completed, the project also serves as a tool for other communities dealing with similar issues and can be considered an educational research tool. This tool may help other communities.

# 3. A journey to Suriname in the Netherlands: the project that was not implemented

In my introduction, I talked about a project I was working on but ended up abandoning. In this chapter, I will describe the development of the concept and the research I conducted during this process.

## My proposed project

My initial idea was to do a project about the dish roti.

„Roti is a traditional flat bread originating from South Asia. Generally, an Indian bread, made from stone ground wholemeal flour, roti is consumed in India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh" (Dwaine Plaza 2014, p3.).

I wanted to explore in my project why this dish is in the Netherlands. I planned to do a series of interviews with Dutch people of Surinamese origin about their relationship to the type of flatbread known as Roti. Roti is originally a dish from India. It travelled from there to the Netherlands through Suriname. Through these interviews, I found out that roti is a dish which reminds people of their home country or the country of their parents. Thus, the dish serves as a vehicle to feel connected to the homeland or family heritage.

I wanted to find out what people of Surinamese origin associate with this dish and what they feel when they eat it. For this, I planned to conduct interviews to collect stories of memory that revolve around the dish. I wanted to present the collected stories with portraits of the people. I had planned to do this in a socially engaged way. In doing so, I wanted to work with project participants to think about what the portrait would look like, in order not to make a portrait about them but with them.

Below I will explain my motivation for the project, introduce the concept and then go into the problems I encountered during my concept phase.

## Background of the Project

In 2019, I moved from Germany, where I have lived all my life, to Rotterdam. This is where I first learnt about the dish. I saw it at the market in restaurants, at the supermarket, and in advertisements. Before that, I had never heard of this dish, nor of the country of Suriname, from which the dish travelled to the Netherlands. This led me to find out the background and thereby understand why this dish is present in the Netherlands.

I read about the colonial history between the Netherlands and the former colony of Suriname and was deeply affected by it. In Germany, I did not learn colonial history at school. It is important for me to deal with the colonial era history as a white person living in the postcolonial era. Many structures from that time are still clearly visible today and I think they can only be broken through if you deal with these structures.

In 1863, slavery was officially abolished in the Caribbean colonies. Instead of using slaves for the plantations, so-called contract workers were employed. The immigrants came mainly from then British India, Maderia, Sierra Leone, and China. They had to sign a contract in which they committed themselves to work on a plantation for at least five years. With this contract, the employers had

the basic right to decide over them. Among other things, there were punitive sanctions. More than five hundred and thirty thousand Hindustani migrated from India to the Caribbean (Rosemarijn Hoefte 1998, p.20).

The first immigrants from Suriname came to the Netherlands around 1950 because of the agreement called Charter for the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Surinamese thereby got Dutch citizenship. During the fight for independence in Suriname, migration increased. The Netherlands wanted to prevent this trend and even considered revoking the citizenship of the already immigrated Surinamese. This request failed. Many Surinamese feared that there would be no possibility to enter the Netherlands. This led to mass migrations from 1974-1975 and 1979-1980. Nowadays, almost as many Surinamese live in the Netherlands as in Surinam itself (Benedicta Deogratias, Kyera, Singelton and Casey Wojtalewicz 2021).

Through my reading, I also became generally aware of how important dishes can be for a community and thus are an essential part of a culture. The dish travels with the people, there are slight changes that shape the dishes and so there are different variations.

The documentary by Richard Fung called Dal Puri is a journey through time of the dish known as Roti or Dal Puri. This film uses examples and interviews to show how this dish has changed and also explains the history behind it. In the film, Fung explores the question of why the dish, which he knows from his heritage Trinidad and from Toronto, where he currently lives is prepared so differently in India. He recounts the remarkable journey of Dal Puri, which travelled from India to the southern Caribbean colonies in the 19th century and became known in the 1960s as the wrapped roti in North America (Richard Fung 2012).

I found it interesting to find out that the roti dish is shaped by its travels and thus by human history. This finding can also be applied to a wider context: just as roti has become part of food culture in the Netherlands, there are many other dishes that have spread around the world for different reasons. For example, döner kebab, which is very common in Germany. This originated in Turkey. In 1960, Germany signed an agreement with Turkey to recruit guest workers. At that time, Germany needed workers and Turkey was suffering from unemployment. Nowadays, three million people with roots in Turkey live in Germany. (Stefan Luft 2014) In 1960, Kadir Nurman moved to Germany as a guest worker. It is said that he was the first person in Germany to serve kebab in bread as a takeaway snack. He knew kebab meat from a skewer, which is prepared on a plate with rice and salad, from Turkey. There are now 16,000 takeaways that sell döner in Germany, which shows how popular this dish has become (Annette Kögel 2013).

**Approaches to the Project**

I spent a long time thinking about what exactly I wanted to research about the dish roti and how I wanted to approach it. At the beginning of May 2020, I started researching and reading about the dish. In June, I approached people who work in roti restaurants for an interview. I met Asha, who prepares roti in a restaurant. Together with her family, who also work in the restaurant, I photographed her. In October I compared different roti variations. I took a closer look at roti from a Suriname restaurant and rotis from supermarkets and photographed them. Between July and February, I interviewed Dutch people of Surinamese origin and Surinamese people living in the Netherlands, to hear about their knowledge and opinion of this dish. Among others, I interviewed Claude. He is

from Suriname and has lived in Zwolle for a few years. Claude told me that when he felt homesick, he went to a special roti place to eat roti to feel closer to home.

I was aware that this project would be difficult for me to pursue, and I was looking for an approach that was compatible with my ethical compass. I didn't want to exploit anyone or present anything in an undifferentiated way, but I wanted to deal with a subject and present this process about it. The question of whether I, as a white person with no connection to the culture the roti comes from, can address this issue without making biased assumptions or pointing my camera at a group without showing myself, came up again and again in group critiques, conversations with friends and with myself. Thus, it has become a fundamental question for me.

Finally, in March 2021, I was working on a concept with my mentor Anais Lopes, looking at roti from a more personal position. What did it have to do with me personally? The question is important because it gave me a clearer picture of what I wanted to do, helping me to figure out what I wanted to show and what story I wanted to tell in the end.

As a person coming to a new city, I asked myself what it means to feel at home? In the process, I realised what special role food plays for me. Dishes that I know from my home country I can prepare here and feel at home on a certain level. For me, the dish that reminds me of home is pancakes. When I prepare this dish in Rotterdam, memories that I associate with this dish in connection with my home country come to the surface. This has made me realise that the dish has become part of my identity in a way.

Through the interview with Claude, I was inspired to explore the dish of roti for memories of home, just as pancakes are associated with memories for me. For this, I wanted to conduct interviews and collect stories (by recording them) that revolve around the dish roti. Then I wanted to make portraits with the people I interviewed. I wanted to do this with the approach of socially engaged photography. I had thought about how to involve people in the process of photography. So, I wanted to ask them themselves how they would like to be seen in order to develop the portrait together. I also wanted to let them decide where they wanted to be photographed and which photo would be chosen for the project. Basically, I also wanted to keep it open whether they wanted to be photographed at all. Maybe they would have preferred to use a symbol or an object that represents their story rather than themselves.

The idea that I would be looking for people to talk to about their memories of roti and then photograph them for the project felt very wrong to me. I came to this realisation after looking into issues of cultural appropriation and Oterhing and talking to different people about it. Practically speaking, I would explicitly look for people who have roots in Suriname. But after my research, I realised I didn't want to make this categorization, because I asked myself whether I would reduce people to that, which would not be my intention. That is why I decided not to do the project in this way. I also was concerned that I would not have enough time to collaborate, and that the Corona situation would make it even more difficult. In my research into socially engaged photography, I have realised that a lot of time is needed to ensure that good relationships are formed. Many socially engaged projects are therefore created over a period of several years. In the final section, I will talk more generally about the issues with this initial project idea.

**Considering potential viewers**

Dr. Jennifer Good talks about the ethics of photography in a podcast called The Messy Truth. She is a writer and Senior Lecturer in History and Theory. Among other things, she explains the difference of cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation. For her appropriation is about Othering. „It is about photographing a person in such a way, that the viewer is invited to engage with them primarily as a visual novelty, as a visual diversion or Entertaiment. Othering as a verb is a process of pushing somebody away and reducing them to a superficial spectacle." (The Messy Truth - Conversations on Photography, Dr. Jennifer Good - On Ethics 2020). I didn't want to do a project where it looked like I, as a white person, I was using people with brown skin for my project and that could be read as Othering. Ariella Azoulay defines the concept of photography as an event, in a non-imperial understanding of photography. In this view, not only the photographer and the photographed person are involved, but also imaginary or future viewers (Ariella Azoulay 2020). In relation to Dr. Good's explanation of the concept of „othering", this makes it clear to me, how important it is as a photographer, to deal with how photos can be read by other people, and to understand what these photos can provoke as a result. Azoulay explains, that the viewers do not necessarily have the same view as the photographer in relation to the person, who has been photographed (Ariella Azoulay 2020). This may seem obvious, but for me as a photographer, it is important to be aware of it.

Further, Good argues that it does not mean that it is not possible in principle, to photograph people „who are different from us in a way that doesn´t push them away and objectify and absently them". She explains that it requires a lot of work of research, engaging and commitment" to the people you are working with. For example, Good explains that „you can approach a subject that has tended to be stereotyped and you can work to problematise those stereotypes. You can choose to have a particular relationship with that person or community, or cultural entirety, that problematise and deepen and troubles the stereotypes that are all around us" (The Messy Truth - Conversations on Photography, Dr. Jennifer Good - On Ethics 2020).

I am aware that such a project would require a more fundamental and deeper research and preparation than I have done so far. An examination of socially engaged photography shows me that this approach is not sufficient for such a project, which would also require an examination of the political aspects. What is needed is an engagement with the camera that deals with the colonial past of photography. This is where decolonised photography practice comes in. Mark Sealy is a British curator and cultural historian. He is the director of Autograph ABP (London) since 1991. In 2019, he released a book called *Decolonising the Camera: Photography in Racial Time*. In it, he explores the consequences of colonialism in relation to the photography of race. For Sealy is decolonised photography practice a process of understanding and recognizing colonial effects in the work of photography.

Here, Sealy describes that a key function is to engage with photography's colonial past. He proposes to decouple the photograph from certain conditions. This is one of the main arguments of his book. By this, he means "assumed, normative, hegemonic or colonial conditions" that are embedded in people. In this way, the photographic image can be "relieved of conditions that consciously and subconsciously have an influence in the production, subsequent presentation or interpretation" of the photograph. This is about "locating the primary conditions of collegiality of a racialised photograph". In this way, processes of Othering can be defused within the photograph.

Sealy thus appeals for a "plurality of cultural perspectives" in relation to reading a culture's photographer. According to Sealy, there would be a greater understanding of being perceived in different ways and of being different. (Mark Sealy 2020)

This multifaceted system that Sealy describes in the book sounds very complex to me and is not necessarily easy to understand. Here it becomes clear to me that it takes time to approach this practice in order to really understand and be able to implement it.

**Conclusion**

In my research, I explored the approach of socially engaged photography. I wanted to find ways of preventing the unequal power relations between the person being photographed and the person who takes the photographs.

I have analysed different socially engaged projects and worked out possibilities in which artists work together with their participants and have their own voice in the project.

In doing so, I looked more closely at the portrait project Elephant & Castle by Eva Sajovic. She describes her way of working as a democratic act. Her subjects can decide for themselves how they want to be seen and where they want to be photographed.

Furthermore, I examined the forms of presentation of the project Elephant & Castle, because in socially engaged photography it is not only about the participants having a voice in a project but also how the participants are involved in the form of presentation and thus the question arises for whom the project is exhibited.

I have found that the unequal power relations between the person holding the camera and the person looking into the camera cannot be fully resolved. Through the approach of socially engaged photography, the participants get a say and so a way can be found to deal with these power relations.

In my own practice, in addition to socially engaged photography, I have also explored the concept of decolonised photography practice.

I have learnt through the process that it can be very complex to undertake projects that engage with another culture. Through the colonial history of photography that I have looked at, I have become very wary of planning photographic projects where there could be a danger of replicating the violence that the camera brings.

There is no manual that tells you how to do such projects unproblematically. Therefore, it is important to think carefully about every decision and to remain in a critical dialogue.

If I want to realise photographic projects that are primarily about other cultures, there is a danger of reducing and categorising people or groups. This is because often only one point of view can be seen, namely the photographer's point of view. This could be reduced by democratic processes within the project, for example by involving the people in the complete process, i.e., not only in the development of the photos but the conceptualisation of the project and also in the presentation of it.

It is important for me to deal with the political aspects of the medium. This requires an engagement with decolonised photography practice. It takes a lot of time to research and to gain a deep and differentiated understanding of it. It has made me rethink the possibilities, I have dealt with so far, in order to realise projects. One way of implementing future projects could therefore be to make visible one's own perspective into the project. However, I don't know yet whether this aspect is sufficient in my current situation. First, it is important for me to continue to deal with the concept of decolonising the camera. Maybe I will find more ways to mediate between cultures with the help of photography.

**Transcribed Interview with Eva Sajovic**
**Online at the 01.02.2021**

LN: How and when did you decide to work as a social engaged photographer?

ES: It was not a decision. It just involved in this way. So, it first started with portraits. Working always with subjects and their stories. So, the subject would be communicating their words. My approach has always been, that the person I´m photographing can choose by themselves where to be photographed and how to be. And so, I started working on the Elephant&Castel Project, using this approach. This approach allows people to be more involved in the project. And when the book called Home was published, the artist Rebecca Davies contacted me, and together we set up a space in the mall, that becomes an engagement space. The engagement with the people kind of brought this approach forward. It felt it needs to be a collaboration because without the person in the photo there is nothing. It needs to be done together.

LN: When did you had the first thought or situation where you get the interest of doing a project in the area, about the Elephant and Castle Shopping?

ES: I moved into the area in 2002 from Holland. And I moved into Elephant and Castle because my partner's flat was there. Because I did not know anyone, the shopping center was my main point on a daily basis. I started to observe the vibe and the cultures that exist there. I got really drawn on how people inhabit the space because it was more of a community place, where people come and meet on a bench or in a cafe or during their rituals. I was seeing the same faces and that interested me. I started to approach the people and asked them, if they want a conversation and maybe take a photograph. But also, I knew that the area is going to gentrification, and it will change I thought it is really important to kind of create a portrait of it, how it was then because it was very much peoples place and those things are fast going.

LN: How did the people react to your approach?

ES: People were very nice. I don´t remember any bad reaction. People were interested in having a chat, being involved, and curious perhaps. When I also told them, what is its about, I think generally, they felt that it is an important part of the story to create the portrait together with the people. And also, there are so many negative stereotypes existing about this area it felt important to tell the story from the perspective of those who live in the area.

LN: I have read on your webpage „that you archived through a close collaboration with the subject in relation of their portrait that incorporates a story they want to tell" to get to the final portrait. How did you manage this process? What did you do to propose the idea to the people and what were the first steps to preparer the collaboration?

ES: Because I always considered portraits is like two parts things. The story to the photograph and the story to words of the person on the photograph. I´m aware that there isn´t an objective medium. It's a very subjective thing. In order to present something kind of honest how the person sees and feel themselves. I felt it needs to merge the person's words and my depiction of them to bring it more to life.

LN: How did you and the person you photographed, decided the location, the light, the pose, and the final image?

ES: It was a mix of everything. Some people I photographed there and then when I met them. Some people I had a longer term relationship where there would decide where to meet. Because the particular place was imported to them. Some people I meet several times. There was also a

series where people relocated on the accommodation. I photograph them on both places. Or even in the shopping center and in the old home and then in the new home. So, people decided which is the best representation for themselves.

LN: Did you had to try out different strategies to photograph the stories the subjects wanted to tell?

ES: I don´t normally try things bevor. I normally react on the spot. It's kind of my way of photographing. I don´t use lights either. Very kind of responds to the natural environment. I don´t prepare for this. It's not staged in that way.

LN: How long were the photo shooting?

ES: I always have a chat and maybe have a coffee and then take their photo. It could have been that there was only one time and several times and with some people, I´m still in touch.

LN: First you started your project by yourself and then collaborate with a writer?

ES: Yes this is right. After I developed a body of work, I knew that I would need a writer because that is not my expertise. So, she [Sarah Butler] visited a number of people again and drafted their stories of the basis of their words. And after that, I also worked with Rebecca [Rebecca Davies], and we run the space where people could engage with different creative activities with the aim to really discuss what is going on in the area. And then we had more than 40 artists in residency who delivered different activities. And after that, we started running Peoples Bureau where people would teach another different skills.

LN: Is the project finished or is it still in progress?

ES: It was a kind of project what was never planned. It involved from one thing to the next. Just according to the situation and the urgency that I felt and when I felt there was a role I had to play. Now it is decided that the shopping centre will be demolished and rebuilt. So, for a long time, I did not have the feeling anything to do really. But recently I meet somebody a resident of the area. And she approached me again that is really hard for those who visited the shopping Center because its almost like your home which has been taken away. And that made me think that maybe there are important stories to be told because to show the full circle how it went. I´m not sure at the moment but I´m also not excluding the possibility.

LN: I find it interesting that you say, that you think of which role you can have.

ES: Yes. I think there always needs to be a reason why you do something. It's not something that is for me or because I´m interested. What is your role as an artist? I´m questioning this a lot.

LN: For whom did you want to do the project?

ES: It was very important that it was for the people that were in the photographs. People who were part of the book, of the project. So that they can firstly represent themselves. They are happy to kind of have something of the area of which they are part, recognized that they are those part who make the area. And then people who know the area and perhaps find out more about it. And then also for anyone who talks about the area because it's often been misrepresented. And then it also became a tool for engaging in the issues which are going on in other communities. Like an educated resource when you talk about. This is what happens to people when areas are taking over by developers this is a sort of universal problem. It's happening everywhere.

LN: What is the benefit for you to work as a social engaged photographer?

ES: I think I could not do it differently because for me it's kind of a dialogue using photography. For me, it was also a way to get to talk with people. The camera was just one way that I was able to extend my understanding. It's about the visible and it was much more also to get to know the area and about myself, I guess. My place in there. And also in a relationship perhaps being an emigrant and belonging. I think photography has an important role in terms of how we publicly represent ourselves. And in a way when you are creating a photograph with somebody and there are able to choose the photo or say I would like to retake it. It's almost like practicing representing having your public voice. It's about democracy. Who has that voice? Who matters in terms of what they say and that was very much for me in the background in the whole project. Creating these platforms for ordinary people who are in the area to talk about the area not having some experts who are coming from outside to telling what the area is. Elephant&Castel Project, using this approach. This approach allows people to be more involved in the project. And when the book called Home was published, the artist Rebecca Davies contacted me and together we set up a space in the mall that becomes an engagement space. The engagement with the people kind of brought this approach forward. It felt it needs to be a collaboration because without the person in the photo there is nothing. So, it needs to be done together.

Reference list

Buchloh, B., 2014 .Allan Sekula, or What is Photography?,
The MIT Press, No 55.

Azoulay, A., 2010. What is a photograph? What is photography?,
Philosophy of Photography Volume 1 Number 1.

Azoulay, A., The civil contract. New York, NY: Zone Books, 2008.

Azoulay. A., 2020. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay: "It is not possible to decolonize the museum without decolonizing the world." [online] Available at: https://www.guernicamag.com/miscellaneous-files-ariella-aisha-azoulay/ [Accessed: 05 April 2021]

Becher, C. and Holm, M., 2019. Imagining Otherwise: The impact of aesthetics in an ethical framework. Trigger Impact. pp. 23-26.

Bratchford, G. and Parkinson R., 2019. Defining Socially Engaged Photography and Its Ability to Impact a Social Change: A Case Study on As and When. Available through: Academia.edu <https://www.academia.edu/> [Downloaded: 22 February 2021].

Bishop, C., 2019.  Artificial Hells : Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship. 1st ed, Verso.

Deogratias, B., Singelton. K., and Wojtalewicz C., 2021. Race in the Netherlands: The Place of the Surinamese in Contemporary Dutch Society. 2011 [online] Available at: https://www.humanityinaction.org/knowledge_detail/race-in-the-netherlands-the-place-of-the-surinamese-in-contemporary-dutch-society/?lang=de [Accessed: 01 March 2021].

Ewald, W., 2020. About. [online] Available at: https://wendyewald.com/about/ [Accessed: 01 December 2020].

Ewald, W., 2020. Portfolio. [online] Available at: https://wendyewald.com/portfolio/black-self-white-self/ [Accessed: 02 December 2020].

Fung, R., 2012. Dal Puri Diaspora.  [online] Available at: http://www.richardfung.ca/index.php?/scv/dal-puri-diaspora/ [Accessed: 18 February 2021].

Hoefte, R., 1998. A Passage to Suriname? The Migration of Modes of Resistance by Asian Contract Laborers. Cambridge University Press on behalf of International Labor and Working-Class, Inc.

Krewinkel, B., 2017. A conversation about conversation with Ben Krewinkel, [online] Available at: http://www.asocialpractice.com/a-conversation-about-conversation-with-ben-krewinkel/) [Accessed: 02 February 2021].

Kögel, A., 2013. Döner-Erfinder Kadir Nurman ist tot. [online] Available at: https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/tuerkisches-fastfood-doener-erfinder-kadir-nurman-ist-tot/8989734.html [Accessed: 17 April 2021].

Luft, S., 2014. Die Anwerbung türkischer Arbeitnehmer und ihre Folgen. [online] Available at: https://www.bpb.de/internationales/europa/tuerkei/184981/gastarbei [Accessed: 17 April 2021].
Rovers, S. 2021. About. [online] Available at: https://sabinerovers.com/About-Sabine-Rovers [Accessed: 15 February 2021].

Plaza, D., 2014. Roti and Doubles as Comfort Foods for the Trinidadian Diaspora in Canada, the United States. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Rovers, S., 2021.Cowboy Kees. [online] Available at: https://sabinerovers.com/Cowboy-Kees [Accessed: 10 February 2021].

Rovers, S., 2020. How to become a social engaged Photographer. Royal
Academy of Art, The Hague P. 22.

Sajovic, E., 2016. About. [online] Available at: https://www.evasajovic.co.uk/about [Accessed: 10 January 2021].

Sajovic, E., 2021. Personal Interview. See appendix page 22.

Sonntag, S., 2001. On photography.
Picador, P.17.

Sealy, M., 2016. Decolonizing the Camera: Photography in Racial Time. Druham E-Theses. Durham University.

Photofusion, 2017. Resident Artist I Eva Sajovic. [online] Available at: https://www.photofusion.org/resident-artist-eva-sajovic/ [Accessed: 13 February 2021].

The Messy Truth - Conversations on Photography, Dr Jennifer Good - On Ethics 2020, podcast, Spotify 7th September 2020, accessed 9 April 2021, https://open.spotify.com/episode/6z3f6CWux DJHj1Dw4r2zO7?si=vXZp03sYRCWKQA7EU48OIw.

# Bibliography

Amersfoort, H. How the Duch Government stimulated the unwanted immigration from Suriname. 2011. University of Oxford

Azoulay, A., The civil contract. New York, NY: Zone Books, 2008. P.8-24

Azoulay, A., Potential History. Verso, 2019. P. 7- 19

Buchloh, B., 2014 .Allan Sekula, or What is Photography?, The MIT Press, No 55.

Fromm, K., Greiff, S., Radtki, M., Stemmler, A., (Editor) 2020. image/con/ text/ Dokumentarische Praktiken zwischen journalismus, kunst und aktivismus, Reimer.

Fromm, K., Das Bild als Zeuge. 2013 Humboldt-Universität Berlin.

Hasters, A., 2019. Was weisse Menschen nicht über Rassismus hören wollen, aber wissen sollten. hanserblau.

Lamming, G., 1992, In the Castle of My Skin, University of Michigan Press

Richin, F., 2009, After Photography, WW Norton & Co

Rovers, S., 2020, How to Become a Socially Engaged Photographer. Royal Academy of Art, The Hague.

Rollo, A., 2019, Fata Morgana, Ediciones Anómalas together with Comunidad de Madrid.

Sealy, M., Decolinizing the Camera: Photography in Racial Time. 2015 Durham University.

Staats, E., 2019. From Benjamin to Azoulay. Ma Film & Photographic Studies.

Sonntag, S., 2001. On photography. Picador.

Ogle, J., 2011 The Constinously Changing Self: the Story of Surinamese Creole Migration to the Netherlands. Harvard University.

Oyrzabel, G., 2018, La Picnolepsia de Tshombè, Breadfield Press, Landskrona Foto Publishing and Witty Kiwi.

Image index